

THE AMERICAN TRADITION IN THE NEXT GENERATION¹

TWO ideas have dominated American thought during the past one hundred years: An unwavering trust in the inevitability of progress and an almost child-like faith in democracy. Science sustained the first and economics the second. Scientists might not agree as to whether the processes of evolution were purposeful or not, but they were all agreed that evolution followed a law of progress, and that the increasing complexity of biological organisms represented an upward climb of values. The philosophers quickly transferred this idea from objective science to subjective man. Social progress was asserted to fall under the same cosmic law of unconscious perfectability. Evolution was almost the only God a man needed. The world was growing better by the inward necessity of its own benign forces.

As Mr. J. B. Bury pointed out, this idea of progress is of modern growth. Neither the Greeks nor the historic Christian church had sufficient optimism to accept it, and with us moderns it has recently received a rude jolt. Today many of us ask whether degeneration rather than regeneration is not the course of nature. Even the most optimistic may well doubt that uninterrupted advance towards a state

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of general happiness is a necessary consequence of the inner powers of man.

On the continent of Europe, democracy after brief trials has likewise met a withering attack. A century ago, it was hailed as the key to Utopia. It challenged social regimentation by offering a release from inherited class privileges and arbitrary government in the interests of the few.

America's great contribution to history was her defiance of vested rights to public office and her bold acceptance of the democratic principle. True, the inferences of Jacksonian democracy built up certain unfortunate traditions. Its ideology imposed heavier burdens on the electorate than they were able to bear. It gave us an army of professional politicians, the spoils system, rotation in office, the long ballot and popular hostility to special capacity in administrative officers. In honesty and efficiency our Government has been surpassed by others organized on the aristocratic principle, but it has endured while others so organized have succumbed.

In every discussion of present-day politics it must be remembered that our political institutions were originally built on a foundation of a simple capitalism of widely diffused private property, decentralized industry and wide scope for enterprise in familiar fields. Individualism was indigenous to the soil. To preserve popular government our economic and social institutions must be such as encourage the spirit of freedom in the body politic, and not merely in the few. The advantages of large-scale production of goods and services have become too completely embodied in our standard of living to permit a return to the simple society of our forefathers, but the synthesis of modern industry and individual aspirations is still to be worked out. It is the problem of the age. Easy phrases about planning,

which miss the point entirely, will not solve the problem.

The individual's claim to opportunity explains not only the demand for manhood suffrage in the early days of our history, but also the growth of governmental regulation as business units grew in size and concentrated power. At no time has the spirit of America been collectivistic. The movement for regulation of business, which began with the Granger movement of the 70's, was essentially a conservative effort to perpetuate the system of American individualism. The purpose behind the campaigns for the regulation of railroads, grain elevators, banks, and other public utilities, for anti-trust laws and for the control of unfair trade practices, was the desire of the small business man to continue as he was without domination by monopolies of centralized economic power. Opinion shifted from absolute faith in *laissez-faire* to trust in governmental regulation, but the objective was the same, to give the individual a chance.

If we are realistic we shall accept the fact that the demand for governmental regulation shows no evidence of abatement. While each fresh extension of power meets the opposition of conservatives, once introduced, political control tends to become established in the minds of everyone. Thus, for example, we find Mr. Hoover and Mr. Mills approving those restraints and aids set up in earlier years, while condemning the additions to the catalog introduced by the present administration. Yet it is a truism that what these gentlemen now approve as proper governmental activities would have been rank socialism a generation ago.

To make popular government a success in the modern environment far removed from the habitat of the simple economy in which it was born is the great unsolved problem of the age. No people will turn their backs on the com-

forts of the machine age because of any romantic thoughts about democracy or popular government. As Mr. Mencken has said, men love liberty but they love their ham and cabbage more, and if the latter are not forthcoming they will surrender freedom for the seductive pretensions of tyranny.

It is to government that our people are turning to resolve the dilemma. Were Jefferson alive today he would have grieved at the willingness of a free people to unload their troubles in the lap of Mother Government, and the extent to which his warnings regarding concentration of political power have been ignored. By the vast majority government is no longer viewed as a necessary evil. Rather has it become a way of salvation to which the world, in mingled hope and fear is ready to commit its destiny. Let us not forget, however, that its primary job is not to provide wealth for all, or even economic security. Its job is to preserve and create possibilities for the play of instincts and aspirations which are basic to the nature of man but which the modern world may thoughtlessly stifle; and this to its own ruin, for when stifled they burst out in abortive forms of mass tyranny. The task of popular government is to demonstrate that man's instinctive desires for the expression of personality can be preserved in a liberal society, and that he need not turn to fascism or racial paganism to find something to fight for and believe in.

At no time in human history has such responsibility been placed upon government. Success or failure will turn in no small measure upon how well we can administer our government. Here will be found the ultimate pragmatic test which all human agencies must face in this day of large scale production of goods and services.

In the United States we have expanded the scope of gov-

ernmental activities beyond our ability to resolve the administrative difficulties as we have moved along. We have made countless errors from which a professional Civil Service could have saved us. Too often our acknowledged experts have been expert in everything but public administration. Government in this age is no theatre for amateur actors. We have need of the experience, the balanced judgment, the realistic view of artless cure-alls which long familiarity with public administration alone can give.

Government by experts and government by bureaucrats need not be the same. The latter implies government by human caprice and we know that despotism at its best can not long remain benevolent. If Americans are as politically talented as I believe them to be, they will soon demand that their taxes be no longer squandered by political and untrained administrators but will insist that training, capacity and experience be counted for righteousness in a public servant.

There is no compelling reason why the American people should not have at their command a Civil Service which will combine the politician's responsibility to the public, the executive's knowledge of administration, and the student's grasp of underlying theory. But to attain this desirable balance, a second Civil Service reform movement, 1936 model, is required. On the negative side, this movement will arouse the people anew to the immorality and iniquities of the spoils system. On the positive side it will, by appropriate changes in the administrative structure of the Civil Service and by a closer integration with college and university education, provide attractive life careers within the Service. When it comes, the colleges and universities will not be found wanting as a source of supply of public servants who can meet the specifications here laid down.

The fact that government has become the accepted agency for solving social difficulties raises unprecedented problems which the generation now in college will have to solve. The fundamental political question which they must decide is: Can the problems be solved within the framework of American democracy or is a new conception of government necessary and desirable? There are those who preach the inevitable doom of democracy. They say that at best it is a debating society which functioned satisfactorily as long as little was expected of the government. But the time has come, they declare, when democracy will be unable to cope with the need for comprehensive economic planning or to exert the authority over society needed to abolish social injustice. Their arguments are impressive if you accept the premise that man is but a passive victim of economic forces. But if you are not deceived by the seductive pretensions of so-called scientific laws of economic determinism you will agree with me that history is a spiritual achievement, not merely the reflected image of an economic order, and that democracy, more than any other system, provides a favorable environment for the free play of the human spirit.

You of the younger generation can make America what you want it to be. If you value popular government, if you believe in the sanctity of the individual, if you believe that the proper objective of government is not authoritarian regimentation by superiors over inferiors (no matter how humanitarian the superiors believe themselves to be), but that the job of government is to preserve freedom and to use all its powers to emancipate persons from external injustices which hamper and degrade, you can make America free.

What youth demands more today than anything else is freedom; freedom from moral platitudes and for the right

to run the world in accordance with its own ideals. But take care that you use the freedom to build a greater civilization. It is easy to abuse freedom.

Whatever may be said about youth today, and some are saying a great deal, you are trying to think things through on the basis of your own investigations to a degree unknown to your fathers. We of the older generations must co-operate with you, we must seek to maintain an environment for the realization of ideals which are the peculiar possession of youth. If we fail to do so your freedom will be turned to abortive purposes. Such has been the experience of large numbers in Europe where young people, having lost confidence in themselves and respect for individual personality, eagerly abandoned freedom in a flight to pagan ideals which seem to offer new spiritual values superior to the old ones, something really worth believing in and fighting for.

Nature abhors a spiritual vacuum. Democracy to endure must not destroy individual opportunity and self-confidence, else tired of the unequal struggle, without opportunity to follow spiritual values, the next generation will seek escape in some totalitarian "ism" with its own spiritual values, which although counterfeit will serve.

On the other hand youth has a duty to cooperate with age. It is the particular duty of those who have had the privilege of a college education to temper impatience and discontent with the lessons of history, literature, arts and sciences. If you dig deeply enough, you will find that America's tradition and America's dream are valid, a worthy anvil on which America's future may be hammered out.

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